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MIDDLE EAST CONFLICTS WITH A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TOWARD STABILITY AND SUSTAINABLE COOPERATION

Abstract

In this paper, two major ethnic conflicts in the Middle East region are considered, namely, the Kurdish issue in Iraq and Syria, as well as recent conflicts in Syria. Three main theoretical perspectives on identity divides and conflicts are discussed in the context of the Middle East region. The considered conflicts are then analyzed separately, giving a brief overview of the main sources of conflicts in the ethnic context, including the influence of international factors and the current situation on the global scene. A comprehensive strategy for regional socio-economic integration is proposed with possible directions for establishing sustainable peace and stability in the Middle East region. The aim is to interconnect the particular directions toward a unified regional integration approach for solving the problems which cause significant instability in this region. The solution needs to be obtained by combining an appropriate external factor influence and mediation fostering regional cooperation with the forms of institutional engineering. Based on the theoretical and extensive empirical analysis, the European Union is chosen as an external factor having a great capacity and multiple interests in providing stability which will lead to the collaboration with this region.

Keywords: Middle East, ethnic conflicts, mediation, European Union

Introduction

In general, stabilization of the region with violent conflicts is a complex task that requires a quite sensitive approach to providing long-term collaboration and harmonious cohabitation. Such a situation is usually preceded either by ethnic or religious tensions. Namely, the reasons that make the situation complicated are usually historical heritage producing problems between different ethnic or religious groups as well as the context of international relations and confronted interests of big powers that boost up the strained relationship among confronted groups. All mentioned factors exist in the Middle East, making conflicts persistent and resilient to many trials to build sustainable peace in the region. When discussing the situation in the Middle East, it is important to mention the following major conflicts: Iraqi Kurdistan's issue (Cagaptay, 2008; Jüde, 2017: 847), as well as the recent post-war Syrian situation (Wimmen, 2010). The common determinant of these conflicts is that they cannot be solved within the country where they broke out, but the leading authorities within an international community must be involved to find a stable long-term solution.

However, each of these conflicts has its characteristics followed by the set of circumstances in the international order. These conflicts escalated after certain groundbreaking historical events that seriously affected the international order and relations. Iraqi Kurdistan's issue came into the limelight after the Gulf War in 1991 when 35 nations, led by the United States, struck Iraq as a response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. As a consequence of this war, the coalition imposed a no-fly zone in northern Iraq populated by the Kurdish people. On the other side, the recent conflict in Syria was a result of ethnic conflicts as well as a consequence of strongly confronted interests between the United States and the European Union partners on one side and Russia on the other. It was motivated by the energy issues in the region that have been on the 'agenda' of big powers in the last five years. Obviously, these conflicts have to be analyzed and treated separately. Although each requires separate analysis, the conclusions need to lead toward a comprehensive solution that will provide stability and democratization. Undeniably, this is a pretty complex problem, which has attracted the attention of many researchers. Therefore, the paper will briefly list some of the interesting analyzes and suggestions found in the literature.

In the literature, special emphasis has been placed on the role of third-party interventions in resolving conflicts; in that sense, Syria and Iraq have been particularly observed. An interesting approach that also provides models regarding the influence of third-party in resolving the conflict in Syria is

discussed in the paper (Ruhe, 2020). It concludes that the complex situation in Syria does not fit into the existing model. The paper highlights the special efforts related to the negotiations and the role of the UN, Russia, and the USA in ceasefire negotiations between the government and the opposition. Additionally, it reviews other ceasefire efforts in order to mitigate the conflicts that constantly reappear. The paper also suggests that future research should provide answers on how to achieve long-term peace and stability through mediation.

The authors (Sakstrup and Tolstrup, 2020) discuss the role of third parties regarding the Syrian issue. Therein, one of the main findings is that autocratic regimes are more willing to intervene in such conflicts than democratic regimes that have to face their electoral base for each of their decisions. The negative role of direct third-party interventions is also discussed, together with the long-term negative consequences for countries affected by the conflict. Similar to the previous work, other authors (Linebarger, Enterline, and Liebel, 2017) also emphasize the negative role of third-party involvement in conflicts.

An interesting study related to third-party mediation has been given by Ray Block and David Siegel (2011). It argues that the use of identity factors in mediation is insufficiently considered in research papers, especially when having in mind its importance from the aspect of short and long-term interaction and stability in the conflict area. The conflicts between Sunnis and Shiites are especially discussed, which are also of special interest to our research. The paper emphasizes explicitly that the mediator must have a strategy to reduce cleavages between the conflicting parties.

Kahraman (2011) discusses the Kurdish issue in Iraq with particular emphasis on Turkey. The study also defines the role of the EU as a third party in resolving this issue, where this role is observed through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. However, this broader context does not allow Turkey to focus only on the Kurdish problem in the region. Turkey's policy towards Iraq is mainly shaped by its attitude towards the Kurdish issue, and the EU has shown a certain lack of interest in the Kurdish issue in northern Iraq.

In addition to the impact of third-party interventions, an interesting study related to institutional design and power-sharing models with reference to Iraq and Syria is discussed by authors Benjamin Reilly (2011), Soeren Keil, and Elizabeth Alber (2020).

Commonly, in all considered works, the role of third-party is observed in terms of influence on conflict resolution, as well as advantages and disadvantages

of involving individual actors. However, no analyses of long-term strategy have been done that would allow not only a ceasefire but also interaction and cohabitations between the conflicted parties. Hence, this paper could be viewed as a follow-up to the statement given by Block and Siegel (2011: 417). Through a theoretical approach and empirical analysis, the proposed work provides guidelines for long-term stability in Syria and Iraq.

As the main contribution, this paper demonstrates that the EU can be a very suitable mediator for resolving this type of conflict. Through a complex empirical analysis, it will be shown that at this moment, the role of the EU can be the most optimal for a long-term solution to considered Middle East issues. In addition, the framework of multilateralism with a concept of regional integrations is proposed. The level of integration and the role of the EU in such a project are specified. At the same time, some institutional engineering approaches are included to facilitate the implementation of the previous strategy toward establishing more intensive cooperation between conflicting parties. The theoretical approach in the paper represents a sublimation of various theories and results from the literature that has been developed for individual segments of the considered problem. Therefore, the theoretical part aims to integrate different results into a unified approach, which effectively treats the considered problems in the Middle East.

The paper is structured as follows. After the Introduction, second section provides the theoretical framework for the interpretation of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts. Third section provides a brief historical overview of the Kurdish problem in Iraq, as well as the civil war and ethnic tensions in Syria. In fourth section, through the modalities of external influence and mediation, the possibilities of regional integrations are considered in order not only to solve the problems but also to contribute to wider economic and socio-cultural development. Particularly, the theoretical approach, which reveals the EU as the most favorable external factor, is provided. The theoretical proposal is justified by empirical data analysis regarding the economic and political relations between Syria, Iraq, and the EU. Finally, concluding remarks are given in the last section.

Theoretical perspectives on ethnicity and ethnic conflicts

Ethnicity has been generally defined as a feature of identity that is based on some or a group of identity markers or the attributes such as race, nationality, language, culture, religion, and regional belonging (Gilley, 2004; Stein, 2011:

24; Stein and Harel-Shalev, 2017: 1981; Thomson, 2018: 66). It appears as an important phenomenon in politics and social life. Based on certain attributes, an identity group substantiates common beliefs and origins. Societies with identity divides are prone to intra-state identity conflicts. In the comparative political theory, ethnicity has been observed either as a fixed and essential category or, in the modern sense, as an ideational category based on shared ideas and norms (Thomson, 2018: 66). In that sense, to deeply understand the sources of the conflicts in this region, in the sequel, we present three main social and political perspectives on ethnicity and conflicts.

Primordialism, instrumentalism and social constructivism

Primordialism: This approach starts from the assumption that ethnic identity is a fixed and continual feature that is inherent or primordial and deeply substantiated in history, language, tradition, religion, or even biology (Gil-White, 1999: 789; Stein, 2011: 22; Rørbæk, 2019: 24). According to primordialism the ethnic group is determined by the tradition of beliefs, worldviews and actions, hence shared characteristics and origin. Consequently, according to this concept, their ethnic status has been understood as ‘naturally categorized’ (Stein and Harel-Shalev, 2017: 1984). Group consciousness is continued over generations through myths and symbols. For instance, the ethnic identity of nomadic tribes of Kurds from the Middle East has remained for centuries by passing down the cultural identity from one generation to another. Moreover, in the literature, such kind of concept was explained as ‘civilization,’ and over the past, the differences between civilizations caused long-lasting and very violent conflicts (Huntington, 1993). Certainly, one of the most important differentiating factors is religion as an essential element of individual and group identity (Stein, 2011: 22-23). Affiliation to one group, according to primordialism, means feeling threatened by the presence of another religious group. Accordingly, ethnic conflicts are a natural phenomenon appearing not only due to cultural differences but also due to some memorized hatreds from the past. As an example, primordial arguments were often used in media characterizing the conflicts and violence in the Middle East and ex-Yugoslavia, explaining the violence as a consequence of antagonism between different ethnic and religious identities (Stein, 2011: 23).

Instrumentalism: A more realistic approach in characterizing ethnic conflicts is known as instrumentalism, which relies on the modernist’s ideology that identity divides and animosities between the groups cannot be observed

as a historical constant, monolithic and immutable (Rørbæk, 2019: 26). Instrumentalists support the view that the conflicts and identity divides are not socially or politically constructed and always have a certain material dimension and not the dogmatic cause (Stein, 2011: 23; Stein and Harel-Shalev, 2017: 1987). Individuals can have multiple ethnic identities which are changeable and socially constructed, and it is a matter of interest when a certain set of actors appears and acts in front of the national or international community as an ethnic group (Thomson, 2018: 63). What is particularly specific for instrumentalism is the opinion that identity is politicized and exploited by political elites to achieve political goals and power. Hence, ethnicity and, very often, religion represent the identity line used by political elites to mobilize and concentrate groups which are then instrumentalized to compete for political power. Therefore, we can say that instrumentalists recognize that identity such as religion can be used to mobilize the mass, but it is not the deeply-rooted difference between groups that is the reason for the conflict (as explained by primordialism), but the groups are manipulated from the political or even economic reasons. Therefore, to manage the conflicts, instrumentalism usually proposes to focus on and coordinate the political, economic, and social interests of parties (Stein, 2011: 24). Some solutions also address the changes in institutional rules and introduction of power-sharing models.

Social constructivism: This approach combines different aspects and theories, among them also elements of primordialism and instrumentalism but from a different perspective. Constructivism introduces ideational or cognitive structures such as shared ideas and understanding, common norms, and shared expectations (Thomson, 2018: 67). Hence, unlike instrumentalism, the ideational factor is more influential than the material. Ethnic identity is constructed through the social interactions between individuals and groups, and it can change together with the social circumstances (Hale, 2004: 460-461). Furthermore, constructivists argue that individuals usually do not belong to only one ethnic category since the ethnic group is not defined by a single identity, meaning that we have multidimensional identities or a mixture of several identities under one principal category. Constructivism does not view ethnicities as a concept that inherently pushes toward certain tensions or conflicts (Stein, 2011: 24-25). Moreover, ethnic groups can harmonize their goals peacefully through established political instruments, or for example, through the discourses (such as religious worldviews) that promote reconciliation instead of legitimating violence. Hence, in the constructivist's approach, conflicts can be prevented or

managed through the appropriate interpretations. The factors provoking the conflict are not deterministic but produced through social interaction, which means that these could be changed, allowing efficient conflict resolution.

When considering the Middle East region, certainly the main identity marker that determines the identity groups is religion. This region is characterized by more than 50 politically relevant identity groups, of which two-thirds could be identified as primarily religious groups, including Sunni and Shia groups, Coptic Christians (in Egypt), and Alawites in Syria (Rørbæk, 2019: 26-28). Also, 20% of the groups are related to a linguistic affiliation (e.g., Kurds in different countries), and the remaining groups are mainly determined by their regional identity. Nevertheless, religious differences are the dominant factor of group determination, having the strongest mobilization potential in the Middle East region. Indeed, each of described theoretical perspectives can be substantiated by the examples of identity groups and conflicts from the Middle East region. In general, certain aspects of shared identity within these ethnic groups can be perceived as primordial and ancient. However, there are also many aspects being constructed and invoked for different purposes by political elites (to maintain political power) or by the social circumstances, resulting in tensions and struggles of ethnic groups over power and privileges. Particularly, the existing identity-based political inequality between the ethnic groups in the Middle East region (Rørbæk, 2019:28) is a strong incentive to sharpen and use existing differences and divisions for mobilization of political support and power. Such a situation negatively affects the democratic reforms in the Middle East region.

Middle East conflicts that are the object of analysis

This section will provide an overview of some specific Middle East issues: the Kurdish problem in Iraq and the ethnic tensions that led to the civil war in Syria. The Middle East has been characterized by the dominance of politicized ethnic, religious, and cultural divides as a continuation of political acting via identity mobilization (Hashemi and Postel, 2017). According to many authors, the Middle East has been faced with an increase in sectarianism which can be observed as a typical example of identity politics, where identity differences are exploited by elites for strategic manipulation for political purposes (Lynch, 2013; Rørbæk, 2019: 30-34; Valbjørn, 2019: 144), thus weakening the primordial arguments.

Iraqi Kurdistan's issue

The Kurds are the largest ethnic group living in the same territory (shared between a few countries) without having their state. In that sense, their issue is quite important for peace in the Middle East. The Kurds populated the territory of northern Iraq, and it should be emphasized that they were victims of the attacks (even with chemical weapons) by Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime. Therefore, after the Gulf War in 1991, which resulted in a no-fly zone over the territory populated by Kurds, the Kurds obtained more freedom to organize their political life. As a result, two major Kurdish parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, became the main political actors in that territory, having in mind that Saddam Hussein's party had pulled back from that region (Stansfield, 2013; Jüde, 2017: 848; Bengio, 2018).

Although they got a chance to establish the country without war, they started a civil war (1994-1998) in order to prevail and control the whole territory. They made the situation more complex and did not succeed in building the state in this way. So they made a coalition, and with the support of the United States and Turkey, they succeeded in improving the quality of life in their territory. Although formally, the territory of Kurds belongs to Iraq, it can be observed as a *de facto* state or, as some researchers suggest, a quasi-state because it satisfies all the criteria defined by the Montevideo Convention (from 1933), such as permanent population, government, defined territory and capacity for international relations (Jüde, 2017: 849).

Taking into account the previous facts, we could conclude that the coalition can be a powerful driver of state formation, and the case of Iraqi Kurdistan could be analyzed in that sense. This is certainly an alternative theory compared to bellicist arguments saying that warfare and geopolitical competitions were building states. When talking about Iraqi Kurds, it is quite important to mention that their self-rule has provided impressive economic growth and development in the sphere of infrastructure, goods production, and security. On the other hand, the political system has not been developing according to the economy, so they have autonomy, but they will not be *de facto* recognized as independent.

Fighting against ISIS strengthened the position of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), enabling it to make the policy for selling oil from Kirkuk (oil-rich area) on global markets, which seems to be crucial for the economic development of independent Iraqi Kurdistan (Natali, 2007; Cagaptay, 2008: 8-9). The whole situation showed the main actors of Iraqi Kurdistan that the coalition

is crucial for the sustainable development of the country, and it seems that it is the only way for state formation without civil conflicts. Additionally, the Kurdish elite became aware that the partnership with the United States was essential for the future of their country. Indeed, the United States has been a promoter and supporter of the Kurdish coalition, fostering a de facto state. This was proven in the late nineties as well as during the fight against ISIS. Together with the United States, Turkey has been supporting Iraqi Kurds. The Kurds were the important military ally of the United States in the region, but although the United States relies on their help, it prefers keeping the status quo regarding the change of borders. The reason causing fear may lay in the fact that the Kurds are quite spread over the region in a way that Iraqi Kurdistan has between 6 and 8 million inhabitants, Turkey has about 15 million Kurds, Syria has close to 2 million, while Iran has more than 8 million (Jüde, 2017: 853).

Having in mind the situation with the Kurdish minority in Turkey, it is quite interesting that Kurdistan essentially relies on Ankara to access the international hydro-carbon markets. This fact is significant for future relations between Turkey and Kurds and could be used as a base for good relationships. Certainly, Turkey, which had the intention to gain influence in the Shi'a-dominated Iraq (post-Saddam Hussein era) (Šterbenc, 2018: 25), completely turned to Iraqi Kurdistan because of the aim to become a major energy hub for Iraqi Kurdistan's oil resources (Cagaptay, 2008: 854).

In conclusion of this part, it can be argued that the Kurdish issue is undoubtedly the clearest one. The formation of the Kurdish state within Iraq is an open issue, and having in mind the distribution of the Kurds population over the region, complicates the situation in the Middle East. In this phase, it is recommendable to separately consider the Kurdish issues within the territory of Iraq from the Kurdish issues in Syria. It would be quite complicated to solve the Kurdish issue for the whole region in a comprehensive manner. Namely, it would be much better for Kurds to solve their issue in the context of the relations within the region where they live. It is challenging to obtain an agreement when there are too many actors involved. Definitely, the Iraqi Kurdistan issue should be more intensively treated and should not influence solving the Kurdish issues in Syria.

Syrian civil war

Although, in the beginning, it seemed that Syria was just another country in which an uprising caused by the Arab Spring wave would change the domination of the al-Assad family and change the political scene and the government in the country, it did not happen. Namely, the civil uprising pushed Syria into the civil war (Wimmen, 2016: 3; Zisser, 2017). It is not easy to simplify the reason for that, but two main factors should be included to provide at least a basic explanation for the complex situation there. One international factor is the great intertwining of the global players' interests (Šterbenc, 2018: 14), dominantly those from Russia on one side and the United States and the EU on the other. Russia had a military base in Syria's Mediterranean, while on the other side, Russia did not like the idea of using the Syrian territory for pipelines going from Saudi Arabia to the EU. However, in order to produce a severe conflict, it is necessary to have preconditions in the sense of ethnic tensions. In Syria, there was a particular situation that was characterized by sectarianism in social relations. This specificity is mainly expressed through the fact that Syria was governed by the minority Alawite community (Šterbenc, 2018: 16-17). They are represented by 10-12% of the Syrian population, but they hold the majority of the highly ranked positions in the state, especially within the Syrian military and intelligence services (Wimmen, 2016: 6). In that sense, they have a privileged status being spread in their community through friendly relations and informal networks within the community. This community is now a branch of Shi'a Islam that is not popular among people practicing orthodox Islam (Alawite's interpretation of Islam allows them even to drink alcohol). According to the opinion of the majority of Syrians, Alawites are associated with unfair privileges. Alawites are concentrated along the coastal mountain region, with Latakia and Tartus being the principal cities (Wimmen, 2016: 7).

On the other hand, there is the majority of Sunnis. Also, there is a Christian community in Syria, as we mentioned earlier, Kurds in the northern part of the country. The tensions between the Alawites and Sunnis have been a longstanding situation within Syrian society. Sunnis have always had difficulties in ordinary acting with united leadership due to the many confrontations between Sunni in the south (agriculturalists), Bedouin tribes in the north and east, and urban habitants in Damascus and Aleppo. Even the radical Muslim Brotherhood trying to destroy the Alawite regime could not mobilize the majority of Sunnis for this purpose. Alawites used this situation to increase the intelligence survey and their influence in Syria (Phillips, 2015; Wimmen, 2016: 7). Sunni animosity has

increased in the last few decades because of the privileges Alawites gained from the country. The strategy of Assad was to make Alawites a loyal block while keeping the Sunnis divided. Such a situation caused a revolt of Sunnis (Šterbenc, 2018: 18-20).

This ethnic structure and circumstances before the war were a solid base for initializing a civil war where democracy was not a common determinant for all factors. Namely, if there is a fear from other ethnic groups, it is quite difficult to mobilize the critical mass of people for democratic changes. Alawites had a fear of a holy war against them; on the other side, Kurds were in the anti-Assad coalition but for their interest, and finally, Sunnis were divided between the radical Islamists (joining ISIS) and democratically oriented people who just liked to change the regime. The result of the whole situation, including the international factors, was a bloody civil war.

In northern Syria, during the civil war, the Kurdish autonomous region Rojava emerged in 2012. Kurds in this region were an important ally of the United States in fighting against ISIS. The emergence of this region complicated a bit the relations among the Kurds because a kind of competition appeared between them and Iraqi Kurds, also causing Turkey to keep an eye on the situation there because of its Kurdish minority. Therefore, Kurds in Syria should resolve their issue, taking into account only the context of inter-ethnic relations within Syria. If Kurds tried to solve their issue comprehensively, it would not be possible within these international circumstances and would make questionable even those certain positions achieved so far.

The main goals of the Kurds were self-defense and self-government without the interference of the Syrian government. The Kurds in Syria, who are under constant pressure from the Syrian government, could unite with the autonomous Kurdish territories in Iraq, which would provoke a strong reaction from Turkey.

Although, at first glance, it seems that the observed conflicts have completely different origins and nature, the problem can be solved in a unified way through institutional engineering and the involvement of an external factor such as the EU that may guarantee democratization and integration, applying at the same time a kind of institutional engineering. What is particularly interesting is that such a model would be mutually beneficial for both the Middle East and the EU, and it would lead not only to resolving this hotbed of possible conflicts but also to significant economic progress whose effects would go beyond the EU and the Middle East.

EU mediation and influence as a key factor for stabilization and democratization

The stabilization and the provision of security in the Middle East region are subject to many internal and international factors. Managing ethnic conflicts represents a complex and challenging process that primarily involves third-party mechanisms (Bercovitch and Derouen, 2004: 153) and democratization through different forms of institutional engineering.

In order to apply some form of institutional engineering in general, it is necessary to have a relevant external factor that will help the implementation of the initial model, and that will enable its development through permanent impact. Consequently, third-party mediation has been found as crucial for efficient conflict prevention, mitigation, and solution (Ruhe, 2020: 2). The aim of this section is to propose a comprehensive approach to solving the problems in the Middle East through the external influence strategy for regional integrations and accompanying institutional engineering. Therefore, in the sequel, the paper will analyze EU's potential as an international mediator for the observed conflicts in the Middle East region and propose an efficient regional mediation strategy. Particularly it is important that the EU has a capacity, but also what is called bias or affinity (preferences) for the mediation in this region (Scalera and Wiegand, 2018: 434).

The EU has been perceived as a significant security actor, particularly in its neighborhood, and in certain cases, it showed more efficiency in the peacebuilding context than the other actors due to its specific mediation strategy (Niemann, Haastrup, and Bergmann, 2018). The EU mediation bias is mainly based on regional (geographical proximity) and economic ties with certain regions, as will be discussed, but the EU mediation affinity is also linked with its normative power, particularly in promoting and protecting democratic principles and human rights, strengthening international security and preserving peace.

One of the basic and very important preferences is that long-term peace and stability in the Middle East region is of vital interest to the external factor, i.e., the mediator. To substantiate this claim, we processed the data related to the global Geopolitical Risk (GPR) index shown in Figure 1. As can be seen, the prominent peaks in the global GPR index are related to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. These risks also had secondary effects (migration crises) that caused certain blows to the economy and the EU political system itself.

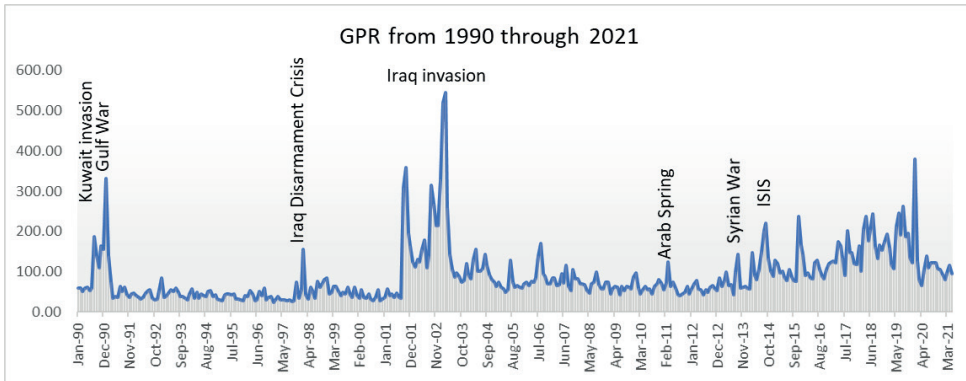


Figure 1. Global Geopolitical Risk (GPR) index measured in the last 30 years.
Sources: Mateo and Iacoviello (2021).

Therefore, the EU could undoubtedly have an interest in helping solve the mentioned conflicts and play an important role for several reasons. The first reason is security, especially having in mind geographical proximity (Bercovitch and Elgstrom, 2001). All these conflicts are happening in the EU's immediate neighborhood, and therefore deep and lasting conflicts are not in the interest of the EU. Hence, the EU is motivated to mediate conflicts in its geographical proximity. As said earlier, the EU certainly has the greatest challenges in solving the problem of the integration of Syrian refugees. Moreover, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) addresses the security cooperation (also political and economic) with neighboring regions such as the Middle East (Scalera and Wiegand, 2018: 439). In order to further substantiate the position of the EU as an external factor, it is also important to refer to the influence on the democratization process. In that sense, it has been shown that the time necessary for democratization is related to the geographical distance between the target country and the western democratic actors (Grimm and Weiffen, 2018: 265-267). Tolstrup (2013) discusses that it has been shown that if the region is closer to the democratic centers, it should be more prone to accept democratic norms, resulting in faster and more efficient democratization. Therefore, the position of the EU is quite suitable for being influential in the democratization of the Middle East.

Another reason or affinity is the economic benefit the EU could have if this region were peaceful and prosperous. Namely, as soft power, the EU has been traditionally viewed as an actor capable of efficiently using economy and trade as a foreign policy mechanism to spread democratic standards and norms (Scalera

and Wiegand, 2018: 439-440). Strong economic cooperation, trade agreements, investment, and development projects in the affected region represent an emphasized EU’s mediation power in managing conflicts (Cumming, 2015), particularly in its neighborhood such as Balkan countries and the Middle East. The third reason is energy. Namely, it is important to emphasize that the Middle East region is rich in energy resources, which can be an excellent alternative to Russian resources, on which the EU is dependent to a certain degree. In order to empirically substantiate the previous claims, this paper provides an extensive analysis of data related to trade and partnership between the EU and Syria and the EU and Iraq. Figure 2 (left) shows the trade (imports and exports) between Iraq and the EU from 2010 to 2020. The comparison of the total Iraq–EU trade and the trade between Iraq and other countries, excluding the EU, is provided in Figure 2 (right). Additionally, Figure 3 shows ten main trade partners for Iraq.

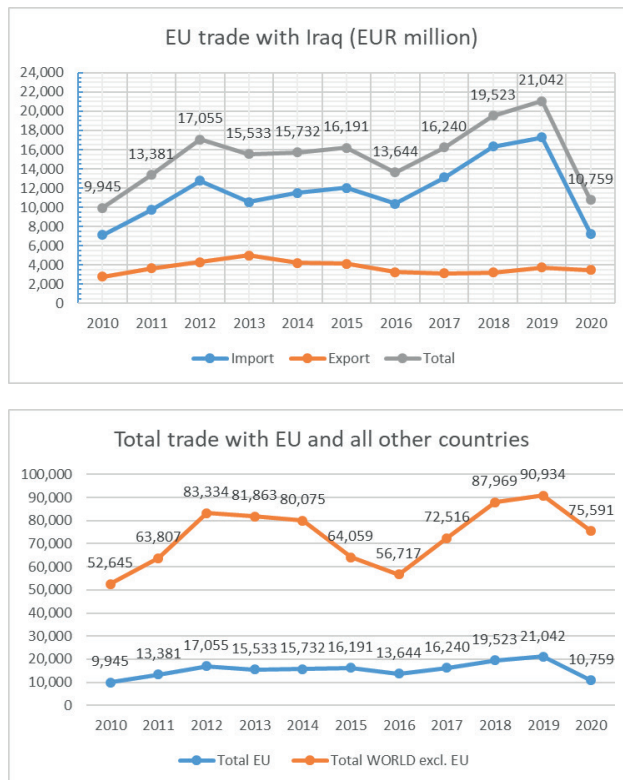


Figure 2. Left: Iraq-EU trade from 2010-2020 (export, import, and total), Right: Total trade with EU versus total trade with other countries excluding EU (author’s calculation based on Eurostat Comext and IMF data).

Iraq's imports are significantly higher than exports (Figure 2), and it was growing until the pandemic in 2020. On the other hand, Iraq's exports to the EU are fairly stable. It can also be seen from Figure 3 that the EU is Iraq's third partner in terms of both exports and imports. As for imports, the first two are China and Turkey, and for exports – China and India. When it comes to the EU imports, it should be emphasized that all imports are fuel (99.7%), while Iraq imports from the EU mainly machinery and transport equipment, as well as chemical products.

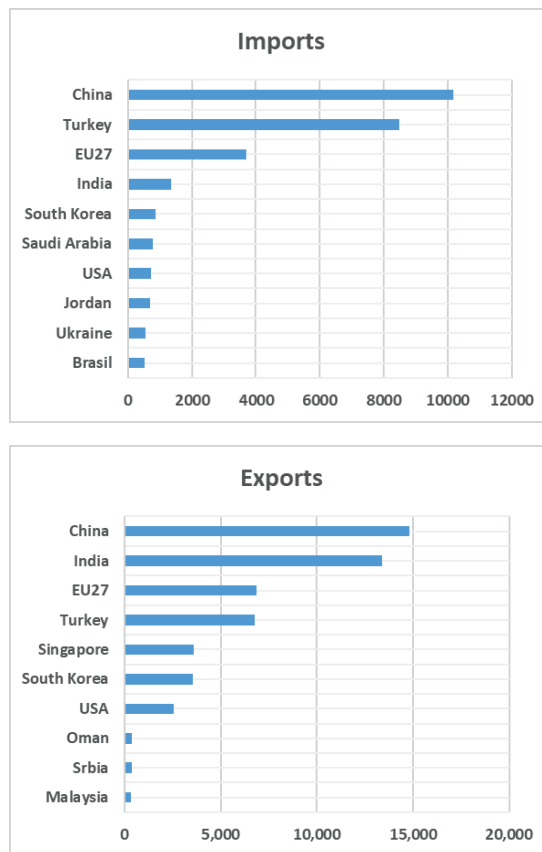


Figure 3. Top 10 trading partners for Iraq. Sources: IMF.

Figures 4 and 5 show the selected and processed data related to Syria. The EU–Syria imports and exports are given in the period between 2010 and 2020 (left). The comparison of the total Syria–EU trade and the trade with other countries is provided in Figure 4 (right), omitting the peak in the year 2010 in order to better represent data over the years.

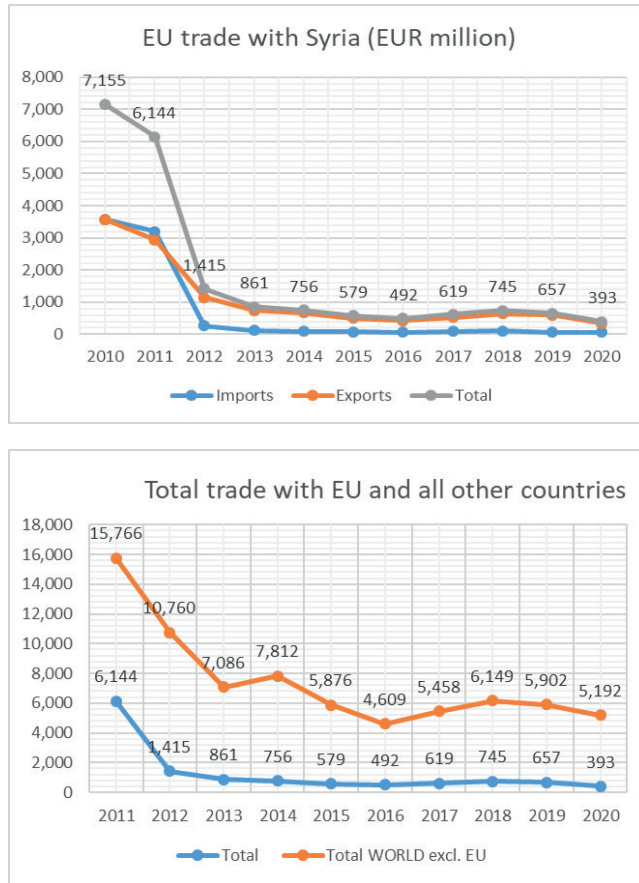


Figure 4. Left: Syria-EU trade from 2010-2020 (export, import, and total), Right: Total trade with the EU versus total trade with other countries excluding the EU (author’s calculation based on Eurostat Comext and IMF data).

It can be observed that the EU had much larger imports from Syria in 2010 and 2011, before the outbreak of the conflict, than in 2019 and 2020 (if we compare 2010 and 2020, the ratio is close to 60 times). Also, Syria’s imports from the EU have fallen a dozen-fold. As for the EU imports, agricultural products dominate, while the EU dominantly exports manufactures.

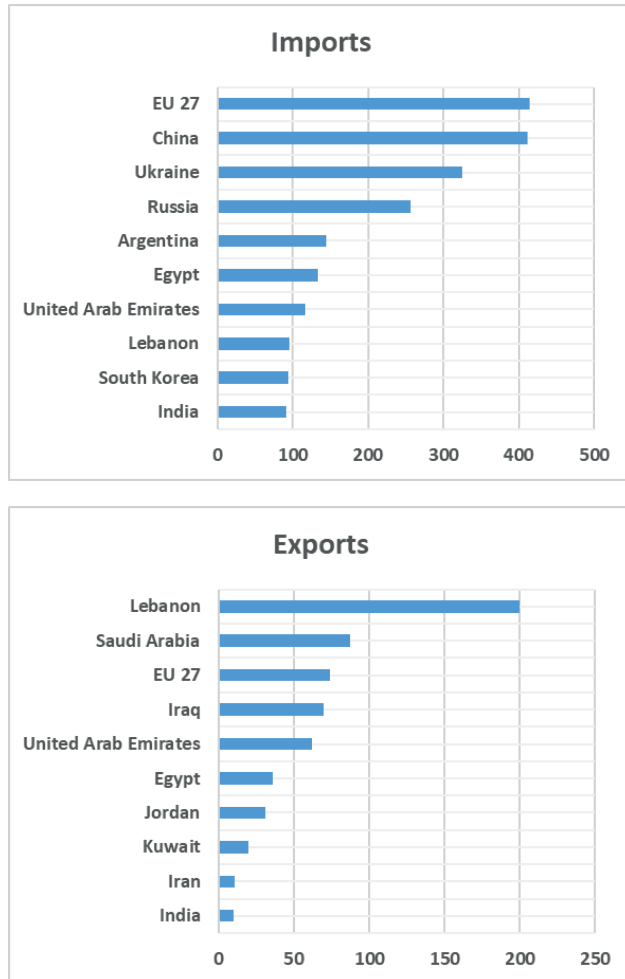


Figure 5. Top 10 trading partners for Syria. Sources: IMF.

Figure 5 shows the ten largest partners of Syria regarding imports and exports. Among them, the EU imports are the most for Syria, while in terms of exports, the EU is the third partner of Syria after Lebanon and Saudi Arabia. Looking at these data, we can conclude that the EU is a significant trade factor for both Syria and Iraq. In particular, when analyzing Syria, one should have in mind the extent of trade that can be developed in the future, which should exceed the figures for 2010 and 2011. For Syria and Iraq, strengthening economic cooperation and exchange with the EU would bring many benefits in recovering their economies, and for the EU, investing in Syria and Iraq could be a good investment in the

future. Finally, the existence of trust and confidence could also be decisive in the mediation process. The EU's role as an external factor is quite appropriate for the considered Middle East countries, having in mind the multinational and multicultural structure of the Union. The EU unity represents the advantage in terms of acceptance, credibility, and confidence as the mediator (Elgstrom, Chaban, Knodt, Muller, and Pardo, 2018; Niemann, Haastrup, and Bergmann, 2018). The EU, as such, is more attractive for cooperation than Russia and the United States because these Middle East countries have lower physical distance from the EU, and at the same time, the EU represents an attractive role model in the sense of integration. An example in favor of the above is a huge percentage of migrants from Syria and Iraq that have the EU as a target destination (for instance, approximately 1 million migrants from Syria live in the EU (UNHCR, 2021). The large number of refugees who have taken asylum in the West could be an additional link to the establishment of greater trust between the EU and the two countries. Therefore, the impact of such a power can be very productive and result in long-term stable solutions. However, in order to achieve the desired impact, it is necessary to create a cooperation plan that would also include the EU.

The concept of the EU's mediation strategy based on the regional cooperation approach

The success of external influence and mediation is closely related to the linkage between the target region and the external actor. Thus, it is necessary to create a systematic framework and attractive linkage policy for collaboration in the sense of offering a certain kind of regional integration. So far, the EU approach to the situation in the Middle East is characterized by many overlapping initiatives, but there is a lack of a general multilateral strategy (multilateralism instead of bilateralism) (Kahraman, 2011: 710). Trying to observe and solve the problems and conflicts discussed in the previous section as separate cases does not seem to be an efficient approach having in mind too many actors involved, too many divided identities, and too many intertwined interests, which together cause a vicious circle effect. Instead, it could be more effective to develop a comprehensive regional strategy that would employ multidirectional cohesion mechanisms through intensive collaboration and stronger economic ties with the EU to create democratic institutions and a society oriented toward economic growth and development. Hence, the EU needs to opt for the Middle Eastern regional solution through the development of special programs for economic,

scientific, technological, and cultural cooperation, supported by financial incentives and investments and coordinated by the EU. In this scenario, the EU is not just the mediator but an influencing actor that imposes the norms and conditions for building stronger ties between all Middle East actors and the EU, consequently fostering cooperation within the region. In this case, it would be interesting to consider a certain kind of integration within the Middle East that could, in parallel, fulfill requirements making it closer to the EU. Since there is a very specific situation in the Middle East, it would be effective also to set some less restrictive requirements in the first phase, as is usually the case with NATO (as an external factor), which imposes to the future members.

Therefore, in order to create the prerequisites for effective external influences, it is necessary to define particular goals for the target countries, the fulfillment of which would bring a certain satisfaction that would be attractive to them. In that sense, a good model would be for the EU to proclaim a certain type of integration in this region, which would include Turkey in addition to the existing countries/regions. These integrations could be similar to MERCOSUR of South America (Baumann, 2008), but in this case, any kind of institutional connection should be rewarded by the EU in the form of investments and benefits that the Middle East countries would receive for cooperation with the EU. Therefore, through integrations, a certain level of standards that should be met would be proclaimed, and for each level of standards fulfillment, benefits would be realized in cooperation with the EU. Through this mechanism, there would be control over the institutional design, which should ensure the functionality of individual countries and the region as a whole. By building such relations, the EU would build a reliable partner in its neighborhood and open up great opportunities for economic cooperation between this region and the EU. Given the political and economic capacity of the EU, it is unlikely that any part of the region could remain on the sidelines and could not participate in such an integration plan. The fact that Turkey has been a candidate for EU membership for many years would help to facilitate this whole process. On the other hand, a new modality of cooperation between the EU and Turkey would be opened up. In this way, as a NATO member, Turkey would get a completely new role and be a bridge of cooperation between the Middle East and the EU.

A scenario of this kind would be a huge step in international relations and show the path for solving the problems for many other regions. Creating closer ties between different regional institutions through cooperation with the EU and international multilateral projects will systematically improve productivity

and economic complementarity and consequently improve regional trade and regional socio-economic integrations. Moreover, in this way, not only that the huge problem of permanent ethnic conflicts and instability would be solved, but also opportunities for the economic growth of Europe and the Middle East would be opened up with the potential to contribute significantly to the world economy development.

Finally, it is particularly important to explain the feasibility of the discussed approach. As previously emphasized, Turkey would play a very important role and have multiple benefits from such an idea because it would allow Turkish Kurds to achieve more intensive contact with the rest of the Kurds in the region through the aforesaid kind of integration. Turkey, as the largest economy, would significantly shape the economy of this new possible community and could reap significant benefits through energy trade. Syria would gain stability and significantly increase its operability. On the other hand, the Iraqi Kurds would get a greater degree of freedom and, through intensive trade and communication, come to a solution that would be optimal for their functioning. As it was said, the EU would get a strong partner in its neighborhood, which would influence the development of the economy in the EU itself, primarily through energy resources, but also other types of resources.

Institutional engineering and power-sharing models in promoting political stability in the Middle East region

The process of socio-economic integration in the Middle East by the proposed EU regional strategy needs to be accompanied by the development of a stable and democratic political environment in each of the conflicting zones. According to McCulloch (2014), the term institutional engineering is considered to provide some solutions in designing institutions with the aim of reducing the chance for ethnic conflict or mitigating and suppressing conflict when it appears. Namely, through the process of intensive collaboration with the EU, the region should take the opportunity to gradually adopt the EU norms, democratic principles, and institutional design to attend to their ethnic conflicts and socio-cultural divisions. Therefore, in the sequel, the paper discusses some possibilities for the institutional design that can be implemented in the considered case of the Middle East conflicts, in coordination with the EU as an external guarantor and facilitator of the democratization and integration process.

In conceptualizing power-sharing practices in deeply divided societies, there are two main macro-political approaches known as consociationalism (Lijphart, 1977) and centripetalism (Horowitz, 1985). These approaches address the modalities in political institution design. Consociationalism advocates grand coalitions of group leaders, group autonomy, and mutual vetoes on issues being of vital importance to the groups. The main premises are inclusion, representation, power-sharing, and the promotion of the proportionality principle in the public sector and electoral system (Bogaards, 2019: 519). The interests of ethnic groups can be properly articulated through various types of regionalization and power-sharing model of governance. Centripetalism, on the other side, favors the executive coalition of moderate parties and decentralized government with the power to distribute multiple instances. The focus is not on advocating ethnically-based autonomy but on changing ethnic politics. Consequently, the focus is on majoritarian electoral systems, which need to be oriented toward encouraging moderates, as well as promoting incentives for cross-ethnic and multi-ethnic parties and candidates (Bogaards, 2019: 520). Centripetalism aims to keep different ethnic groups together and to provide political stability and democratic development (Reilly, 2011: 263).

Usually, in the literature, consociationalism and centripetalism are seen as opposites, but indeed they cannot actually be considered incompatible (Bogaards, 2019: 521). Moreover, a hybrid model based on the combination in which some elements of centripetalism are incorporated in the consociational model would be interesting for analysis, as this combination may assure higher stability of the consociational model. Hence, the elements of both models can be combined in a variety of manners to optimize the institutional design for specific kinds of ethnic conflicts in the Middle East. In that sense, some particular Middle Eastern cases considered in this paper will be discussed in the sequel.

The institutional solution for this situation should be in the form of consociationalism (Reilly, 2011: 261-262), which stimulates political participation of different ethnic groups and articulation of their interests through a region-oriented structure and power-sharing governing model (Posthuma, 2011; McCulloch, 2017: 405-407). In some situations, the consociational model may keep the society divided without intensive interactions between divided groups, which is not the guarantee for long-term stability. Therefore, it would be very important to embed some elements of centripetalism (Reilly, 2011: 202), which is indeed based on incentives for joint political actions, unlike consociationalism, which imposes certain constraints for collaboration (McCulloch, 2017: 418;

Bogaards, 2019: 526). Having in mind that consociationalism and centripetalism are opposed to each other, the system should be implemented in the way that the political institutions are designed using the fundamentals of consociationalism. In contrast, centripetalism should be incorporated within the joint scientific and cultural institutions through which it will be possible to achieve stronger integration factor for different ethnic groups. Such a strategy may lead to higher confidence, more intensive collaboration, and higher interdependence, which consequently produce higher stability and democratization. Israel, for instance, has excellent scientific and technological potential and, with the proposed EU-mediated regional integration strategy, can take the leading role in the knowledge and technology transfer in the whole region.

Let us consider a complex situation in Syria with three ethnic groups: Alawites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Again, one of the reasonable solutions could be to apply consociationalism as a model of institutional engineering. In that sense, three entities could be formed, namely: the autonomous Kurdish region (with a Kurds majority) in northern Syria, the Alawite region along the coastal Mediterranean region with the Alawite majority, and the rest of the country should be reserved for Sunnis majority. In the first stage, it could be a union or federation of three constituents with the right that all of them may become independent countries, but not before a certain level of democracy is achieved. Therefore, a high level of democratization is a prerequisite for any structural change. In a fully exploited democracy, the citizens are more responsible and pragmatic and have developed abilities to decide what is the most appropriate for them. Additional contributions can be achieved by hybrid solutions. Hence, consociationalism should be combined with cultural and scientific centripetalism, which will contribute to the cooperation between groups, decreasing social cleavage and increasing democratization, especially through the framework of intensified relations with the EU. After achieving democratization, it would be clear which tendency would be dominant: a tendency for stronger cooperation or the tendency toward independence.

The territory of Iraq has been disputed among its ethnic groups, the Islamic State, and foreign forces. According to the constitution, the Republic of Iraq is federal, where this federal element was mainly the demand of the Iraqi Kurds who insisted on the Kurdish region called Kurdistan, with its political institutions (president, parliament, and government). Hence, the political system is featured by segmental autonomy, i.e., territorial autonomy, where the cultural community is compact within one region (McGarry and O'Leary, 2007; O'Leary, 2013). The

political system faces several lacks of important consociational characteristics, such as the grand coalition and the veto powers for ethnic and cultural groups. It seems that regarding territorial autonomy, a similar model as in Belgium could be the most appropriate, namely, Baghdad as capital and the separate multicultural and multi-ethnic unit, Kurdistan, the southern region dominated by Shiites, and the western region dominated by Sunnis. Moreover, the constitution needs to be changed to enable the introduction of some elements of centripetalism to increase the sense of unity, improve the communication between regions and groups, and diminish the possibilities for conflicts through the democratization and economic, cultural, and scientific collaboration under the mediation of the EU. Also, instead of using the model of a simple majority, a two-thirds voting system should be implemented for any crucial issues regarding the culture, economy, security, and similar.

Conclusion

The previous analysis has shown that the situation in the Middle East region is very complex in the sense that ethnic conflicts have often led to bloody clashes and wars. The existing tensions and animosities are very rooted in the historical heritage and the political life, making each side not amenable to negotiation, and consequently, the agreement is difficult to achieved. The international influence often additionally complicates the situation. The solution is proposed in the form of a regional integration strategy that would foster regional cooperation in the sense of economic and socio-cultural development.

The considered type of problem is usually solved by looking at each particular segment of the problem individually, as well as trying to find individual solutions. However, the individual approaches to solving the mentioned crisis seem inefficient due to many intertwined internal and international interests, and thus the systematic approach needs to be adopted. The aim of this paper was to reach a comprehensive solution with a multi-layer analysis. In order to solve such a complex problem, analysis started from the very theoretical setting of the conflict and historical causes. Further, through empirical analysis and some partial results from the literature, a more comprehensive approach is defined whereby the EU should play a special role. The problem requires parallel engagement in the sphere of economics, politics, and international relations. Namely, the EU should play the role of mediator and bearer of the economic development and cooperation in the region in order to enhance interaction

between different actors through different levels of integration. Hence, this approach needs to be accompanied by a certain degree of integration and political engineering. The economic and political strength of the EU and its interests in the immediate vicinity are a guarantee that such an approach can be successfully implemented. Through the analysis of empirical data, it can be concluded that there is a significant degree of cooperation and economic exchange between the EU and both Iraq and Syria. The proposed approach is supported by the fact that the Western Balkan countries, which were affected by intense conflicts during the 1990s, have reached an enviable level of cooperation by focusing on common goals in fulfilling specific agendas set by the EU. What is interesting for both regions is that refugees from the conflict-affected areas sought asylum in the EU, and they mostly reestablished their lives in the EU. It is likely that these integrations would proceed at a slower pace than in the Balkans but would, in any case, converge toward lasting stability and peace.

The proposed approach could also be generalized to other parts of the world because, practically, several different problems would be solved by applying a single unified approach.

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BLISKOISTOČNI SUKOB I CJELOVITI PRISTUP STABILNOSTI I ODRŽIVOJ SURADNJI

Sažetak

U ovom radu su razmatrana dva velika etnička sukoba u regiji Bliskog istoka, a to su kurdsko pitanje u Iraku i Siriji i nedavni sukobi u Siriji. Tri glavne teorijske perspektive o identitetskim podjelama i sukobima su analizirane u kontekstu regije Bliskog istoka. Zatim se zasebno analiziraju razmatrani sukobi, dajući kratak pregled glavnih izvora sukoba u etničkom kontekstu, uključujući utjecaj međunarodnih čimbenika i aktualnu situaciju na globalnoj sceni. Predložena je sveobuhvatna strategija regionalne socioekonomske integracije s mogućim smjerovima za uspostavljanje održivog mira i stabilnosti u regiji Bliskog istoka. Cilj je međusobno povezivanje pojedinih pravaca prema jedinstvenom regionalnom integracijskom pristupu rješavanju problema koji uzrokuju značajnu nestabilnost u ovoj regiji. Rješenje je potrebno postići kombinacijom odgovarajućeg vanjskog utjecaja čimbenika i posredovanja u poticanju regionalne suradnje s oblicima institucionalnog inženjeringa. Na temelju teorijske i opsežne empirijske analize, Europska unija je odabrana kao vanjski čimbenik s velikim kapacitetom i višestrukim interesima u osiguravanju stabilnosti koja će voditi prema suradnji sa ovom regijom.

Ključne riječi: Bliski istok, etnički konflikti, posredovanje, Europska unija